



# Customer Focus

## EVERYONE'S CONTRIBUTION IS IMPORTANT

Industry veteran and former  
Crossrail boss Terry Morgan on  
bringing stakeholders together

**'WE'RE NOT FRIGHTENED  
TO TRY NEW THINGS  
AND WE MOVE AT PACE'**

Director of contact centre and service at NewDay,  
Francesca Rea, on innovation and delivery



# TECHNOLOGICAL DRIFT

*by Jo Causon*

**F**or a long time now, technology has been positioned by businesses as a panacea. We know the reality to be very different. And we know that – while many efficiency gains are there for the taking – technology gets a mixed reception from customers.

There are many areas of the customer journey and customer experience where digital innovation is, frankly, a no brainer. Customers appreciate well-designed and responsive apps, for instance. There are plenty of back-office functions essential to efficient customer handling – businesses can and should continue to innovate and automate those.

But when we look at customer service holistically, we know that the future lies with a blend of very high-end, very human skills – emotional intelligence, problem solving, the ability to think empathically and respond swiftly – with cleverly, appropriately applied tech.

That last point – the appropriate deployment of technology – is absolutely critical and, as times get tougher, will prove a key differentiator between businesses. Too many organisations apply technology without proper thought or analysis, sometimes seemingly out of a misplaced sense of FOMO: ‘if we don’t digitise, we will fall behind our competitors.’

And yet, when we think about customers with issues that are highly personal or emotional, you can never replace human contact.

Artificial intelligence – for all that it can improve on human performance when it comes to faster

processing – cannot and may never be able to replicate that really high-level engagement required for vulnerable customers. And would we ever want it to?

The point, surely, is that organisations need to be highly cognisant of the decisions they make around tech. It is critical that they avoid walking into solutions that aren’t genuinely fit for purpose or adopting them out of a misplaced sense that they will otherwise lose ground competitively.

Our latest Breakthrough Research confirms these points, and my sense is that the cost-of-living crisis will only intensify the need for personalised advice and contact. Organisations should really plan ahead with that thought in mind.

Organisations must ask what they want technology to achieve and apply it because it will enhance customer experience - versus delivering cost-savings. We must remember that the fundamentals – access, speed and human intervention – are what customers really want.

I’d make a final point about the digitally-disadvantaged. Businesses must think about this crucial group and avoid stereotyping here. Digital access is not always defined by age; it can be caused by financial or geographical constraints.

So thinking carefully and responsibly about different customer groups and the overall experience – as ever – remain paramount.

# September

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# TUNNEL VISIONARY

Terry Morgan's experiences leading complex engineering projects have given him insights into what works and what doesn't in leadership and delivery. He talks to Liz Loxton about these lessons

**Terry Morgan is a veteran of some of the UK's biggest engineering companies and the man who led Europe's largest civil engineering endeavour, Crossrail. His reputation for spearheading complex projects, bringing together talent, machines and dogged persistence is unrivalled.**



The quietly spoken Welshman – who has held leadership roles at Land Rover and BAE Systems – became chairman of Crossrail in 2009 and was knighted in 2016 for services to infrastructure, skills and employment, a summary that neatly captures a set of preoccupations that he holds to this day.

#### CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

Morgan's own career is testament to the importance of apprenticeships – a model he is a huge advocate for. Leaving school at 15, he joined car parts manufacturer Lucas Girling as an apprentice and became a production engineer. He joined Leyland Vehicles – later to be renamed Land Rover – in 1980, during what would become formative years for him and for the business.

"My apprenticeship was very much part and parcel of my career development," he says.

During his 14 years at Land Rover Group, which saw him become managing director of Land Rover Vehicles, he oversaw development and production of the Range Rover Defender and the launch of the Land Rover Discovery.

It was a transformational time in a business that was hardly ever out of the spotlight, dogged by criticism of its image and workforce relations. The lesson he took away with him was the importance of listening to both customers and the workforce and fronting up to what were sometimes contradictory soundings.

"For the first time, I experienced having to go back to customers and understanding the difference between them loving the product and at the same time somehow hating it. They loved the image, but they hated the reliability," he says. "We'd ask what they thought of the drive experience – they'd score it eight out of ten, or even ten out of ten. Then we'd ask how they would rate the vehicle and they'd say three. And that taught me how the customer experience impacts on the wellbeing of a business."

Morgan discovered similar cross-tides in the workforce experience. Many employees were intensely proud of working at Land Rover, but sceptical of its management. Morgan and his leadership team did a huge amount of work to improve both customer experience and industrial relations. During a six-week strike, Morgan worked on flattening hierarchies and recognising both skills and the employees' voice. At the end of the strike, he would appear on the factory floor dressed in his Land Rover 'greens'. "We got rid of certain roles, and I worked really hard to work out how life would be when they came back to make life much more inclusive with more engagement."

“Just watch people – how they like to help youngsters develop new skills”

#### STAKEHOLDER MANAGEMENT

When Land Rover's owner British Aerospace sold the group to BMW, Morgan stayed with British Aerospace, moving through several management roles following the merger with GEC Marconi. Once again, he found himself addressing complexity, this time in the form of making a post-merger culture work for a wide group of stakeholders. As HR Director and ultimately Group MD for Operations, Morgan was at the heart of discussions around culture and integration.

"We talked a lot about culture. As HR Director, I looked at the best way we could integrate the team: not wanting to have one half of the business winning, the other losing."

The merger was undoubtedly a painful experience in terms of job losses. Morgan says he learned lessons about the lack of willingness from some people at the top to speak to individuals personally

about their jobs and their future. "I learned a lot about the way people can behave. Now, I'd assume nothing, in terms of the way you think they've been helped."

Nevertheless, he has a lasting regard for the organisation that BAE Systems has become. It has stayed relevant to the UK economy, he says, not least because culturally, it has a deep understanding of the importance of vocational skills.

In 2002, Morgan became CEO of TubeLines, a PPP set up to maintain and manage the Jubilee, Northern and Piccadilly lines, with 2,000 employees transferred from public to private employment. A politically-charged working environment, he quickly learned the importance of applying everything he'd learned about culture change, concentrating on encouraging people to contribute, winning trust through good leadership and demonstrating a willingness to be open about difficult decisions.

**“ Any business that ignores its customers will never survive or grow ”**

**CROSSRAIL**

At age 60, Morgan went to Crossrail as its Chairman, joining this vastly intricate infrastructure project in 2009 just as the first pilings were sunk in Canary Wharf. The engineering project reached its conclusion this year with the opening of the Elizabeth Line, which now links Reading in the West to Shenfield in the East, and transforming traditional tubes stations like Farringdon with gleaming modernity. "It's everything I hoped it would be. People who have gone on it are just amazed at it as a statement of



London in the 21st century, and, of course, it will last well over 100 years."

Morgan is still awed by the technology behind the tunnelling. Eight boring machines were deployed to create 26 miles of tunnels beneath the capital, at times drilling under a metre away from existing tunnels and navigating an underground world of sewers and road tunnels. "At Tottenham Court Road, we tunnelled literally within inches of another tunnel with a thousand tonnes of machinery going through."

This was, as he points out, the first railway built on a digital basis, moving the brain of the train's movement from the track and external rail infrastructure to within the trains themselves. "Spending public money, the project always had to be more than just a new railway – important though that was – it had to be about legacy."

Part of that legacy is emphatically around skills and learning. Right from his very first days at Crossrail, Morgan talked to contractors about their plans to use Crossrail work to embed their own apprenticeship programmes. Many showed an alarming short-termism, while commentators and critics pointed to the construction sector's dependence on labour from central Europe, in particular.

What gets missed is the skills academy that Morgan established to support Crossrail and the 1,000 apprenticeships that the initiative fostered. "You learn very quickly about the importance of trying to develop a culture of positive developments. You just watch people – how they like to help youngsters develop new skills for themselves. It gives people pride in their work when they can transfer their skills to others. And to me that was

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vitaly important. So, I became an advocate for skills development," he says. "And I was behind building six skills academies across different sectors. Some have managed to sustain themselves, some haven't. Again, one of the learning points I've come away with is, you have to have a champion at the top."

It is regrettable to him that George Osborne's Apprenticeship Levy hasn't gained the traction it needed. The harsh truth is that political support can become patchy, and against that backdrop, momentum is hard to maintain.

### LESSONS

So, what are his lessons for the future as we look to build back better and reset the UK for growth in what continue to be turbulent times?



Championing vocational skills and giving them a meaningful support system comes first.

"I haven't got the solutions for everything, but I really do believe in the importance of not giving vocational skills a 'division two' status," he says.

He notes politicians' commitment to skills, particularly in this summer's leadership campaign, but suggests that a deliverable skills strategy for the UK has yet to be articulated.

Placing a premium on wide engagement with everyone is mission critical, he says. "To some people, their role in delivering within an overall programme might seem irrelevant, but it's not. The contribution that everybody can make is critically important, and everybody's got their part to play. Getting a level of engagement as high as possible is so important."

Support for the policymakers and funders is up there too. Unsurprisingly, Morgan is a supporter of HS2 (High Speed 2), which he believes will bring wide benefits and growth in ways that are hard to measure. Hard, but not impossible if project leaders tell their story about wider and local impacts.

"Whether it's skills, whether it's local employment, whether it's UK sourcing – there is a whole suite of elements we can use to help stakeholders support their decision."

Speaking about those obligations to stakeholders: "giving back to the stakeholders more than they ever anticipated is very important. With Crossrail, we didn't need to do an apprenticeship programme, but you do this kind of thing to demonstrate that you're leaving a legacy."

Capturing the learning is also key. We have a difficulty in the UK with continuity, he believes. "Successes are based on building on previous experience."

And of course, customer focus matters.

"Any business that ignores its customers will never survive or grow," he says.



# DEDICATED FOLLOWERS

Depop's model blurs boundaries between retail, social media and marketplace selling and attracts a young environmentally conscious audience, as Penelope Rance discovers

**Part e-commerce platform, part social network, community-powered fashion marketplace Depop's digital proposition is unique – and so is its customer service operation. With 30m users across 150 countries, 90% of them younger than 26, Depop's customer service agents act as both retail facilitators and media moderators.**



Founded in 2011, Depop enables people to trade pre-loved fashion, establish shops, follow style influencers and engage with fellow fashionistas. It's also committed to creating a sustainable business model: "the values of sustainability, diversity and inclusion are fundamental to who we are, driving our decision-making every day," says customer experience, people and organisational lead Sandra Morgan. "It creates a supportive environment for platform users and our internal teams. That makes Depop special."

Morgan is committed to shaping a customer service offering that furthers Depop's particular MO. She's well placed to do so, with a customer experience background running contact centres, customer service departments and quality functions, spanning multiple clients. "In my first customer experience agent role, I worked with a beauty brand, a charity, a newspaper delivery company and a financial services account – simultaneously!" she recalls. "Later, I was with a public sector outsourcer, which was a real learning curve, working with unions and a very different customer profile. I moved to a customer-facing role at Charles Tyrwhitt for eight years, then Depop headhunted me."

She has found her purpose in supporting agents, team leaders and managers through learning and development, and using agent and customer-voice data to drive change "Depop offered me a chance to pivot from running a customer experience operation to looking after training and quality." The company's goal of creating a more sustainable clothing industry also aligns with her personal ideals. "When I walk in here, I feel I'm doing something for the planet, for the community. Depop's mission to change fashion through doing the right thing means we're not just focused on the bottom line – we're creating a genuine experience."

Depop's ESG aspirations chime with its predominant user demographic, the environmentally conscious Gen-Z, as does its fluid, digital-only anatomy. Raised on social media and instant consumption, they expect to experience fashion inspiration linked to purchasing – and Depop aims to deliver on

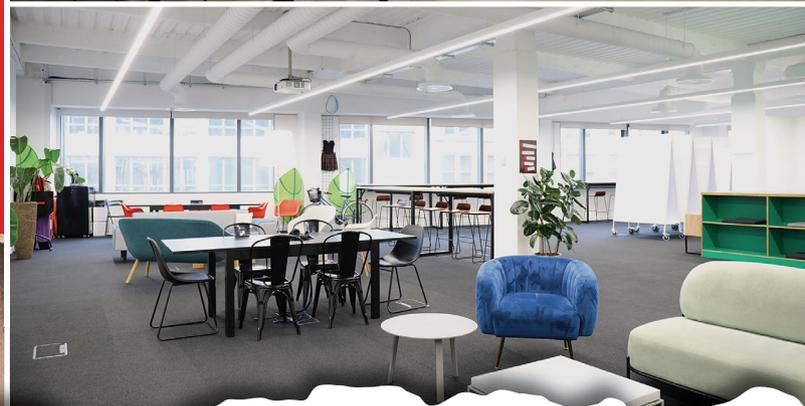
this. Nonetheless, the platform has no 'typical' user, with hobbyists and casual shoppers rubbing virtual shoulders with top sellers generating six-figure annual turnovers. It blurs the lines between commerce and personal connection, consumption, entertainment, and entrepreneurship.

While Depop may expand into new channels in response to customer demand, for the present it remains purely digital. Likewise, its customer service function operates entirely online. Users access support through their transactions on the app, or email via the website. A live chat option is in the pipeline for launch later this year.

“ Depop's ESG credentials chime with its predominant user demographic, the environmentally conscious Gen-Z ”

Confined to electronic interactions, the customer service team relies on written communication and interpersonal skills. "We look for multitasking competence. They may be composing an email, while checking a knowledge base and tracking items through carriers," says Morgan. "But the most important skill is writing with empathy and creating connections through language. They need to build a relationship with the user, be thorough in their response, and try to close it down in one contact, knowing the user feels valued and supported. We find our best team members are former Depop buyers and sellers."

The 55-strong in-house customer service team is remotely based across the UK, supported by an



overseas outsourcer with an additional 200 staff handling moderation, removing counterfeit and prohibited items, and dealing with basic queries. Morgan is conscious of the need to make the remote model work for her team. “We can’t recreate an office, but we can make sure people are engaged. We have stand-ups every week, and we greet everyone at the start of every shift.”

To combat the isolation inherent in remote working, Depop’s culture encourages staff to talk to each other and build bonds. “We work hard at creating a space where people feel they can engage and communicate,” says Morgan. “We bring them in every quarter for a community get together, for personal learning and development, and team building.”

Additional training is done remotely, including a four-week onboarding. “It’s a mixture of teaching people how to do what we do and lots of practice on simple disputes, plus more complex issues, so when they go live, they’re prepared to handle every kind of contact. And we have Slack channels they can go into to get help if they need it.”

Morgan also uses tools from The Institute’s website to support staff development. “There’s great free content available. The benchmarking helps us understand how we’re doing versus our competitors, and

to set targets for improvement. Because Depop is relatively unusual in terms of our customer demographic, I use The Institute’s data and resources to compare us to other organisations with a similar user base.”

Depop’s social marketplace model provides a singular palette of issues for its customer service team to resolve. “It ranges from straightforward dispute issues to abuse or harassment,” outlines Morgan. “Like any platform where the interaction is buyer-seller and the seller ships, our primary issues are simple things like the item hasn’t arrived or isn’t as described – a dispute-related issue.”

But because of its user profile, Depop also has to police interactions. “Our young audience are sometimes not polite or friendly to each other. We want to be a diverse, inclusive community, and you can’t do that if you don’t make the space safe. If our rules are breached, we reach out to both parties, so the person who’s experienced it feels supported, and the person demonstrating that behaviour understands why it’s not acceptable.” Users who bully or harass others are warned and may ultimately be banned from the site.

Safeguarding the customer service agents dealing with serious complaints is equally important. “We have a really good knowledge base and sanctions grid to allow the agents to make decisions,” says Morgan. “But we also do training around resilience



and wellbeing to ensure the team is able to handle that type of content and it doesn't have a detrimental impact on them." If a customer service agent is unable to manage an issue, it is escalated to their manager or shift team leader, or the out of hours on-call process.

“ the most important skill is writing with empathy and creating connections through language ”

While Morgan isn't involved in issue resolution, she reviews serious complaints to identify where the support journey can be improved. "I look at what happened to see what lessons we could learn. I track the categories where we see complaints frequently, then dig into the process, asking why this issue consistently crops up, and how we make sure this doesn't happen again."

The expectation among digital customers for an efficient and automated service, coupled with

personal interaction demands a careful balance of automation and live customer service. Morgan says Depop performs well – but could do better. "As a customer experience team, we're growing, the business is growing, and we need to become more efficient at what we do. We're going through a process over the next six to 18 months, looking at the user journey through the platform, SLA delivery, how long it's taking us to respond and what's causing bottlenecks."

Even prior to this review, its business model and non-standard policies means Depop's customer service function provides a model for emerging digital brands. "We can teach other platforms about looking at everything that's happening for users," believes Morgan. "In other environments, there's potentially a focus on just the dispute element, the buying and selling, but where you have a certain user demographic, you should consider how social media works and how people can abuse others. Those businesses need to look at every type of user experience, respond quickly, and be seen to take action consistently."



## SOCIAL NETWORKS MATTER

- Depop has 30m users in 150 countries; 90% of them are under 26 years old
- In Depop's virtual community, casual shoppers rub shoulders with top sellers generating six-figure sales
- A 55-strong in-house team is supplemented by 200 individuals in outsourced staff supporting
- Many customer service enquiries are straightforward disputes, but Depop keeps a careful look out for bullying or harassment

A smiling woman with blonde hair, wearing a black headset with a microphone, is sitting at a wooden desk. She is wearing a black and white checkered shirt. In front of her is a silver laptop and a teal mug. The background is a blurred office setting with a grey sofa and a green plant.

# A SINGLE PLATFORM FOR SERVICE

The cost-of-living crisis has hit businesses and customers alike. But the combined forces of Virgin Media and O2 won't hold back on innovation – and customer service will continue to shine, as Gareth Turpin tells Peter Crush

**A**pple's founder and former CEO, Steve Jobs, was famous for having uttered: "Some say 'give customers what they want' – but that's not my approach. Our job is to figure out what they're going to want before they do."

His declaration harks to a popular marketing notion that says customers don't actually know what they want until it's presented to them: in Apple's case, who could have predicted the mass popularity of the category-creating iPod, iPhone and iPad?

It's a concept that arguably applies to Virgin Media O2's recent status as the exclusive UK network partner for the 'Nothing' phone – a radical new entrant to the crowded mobile phone market. Created by the ex-head of design at Dyson, it features a light-up "glyph interface" on a transparent back. It flashes different shapes depending on who's calling.

The man who secured the deal – Gareth Turpin, Virgin Media O2's Chief Commercial Officer (who is also responsible for customer services) hopes people will suddenly discover they've always wanted it too. "The one thing our customers tell us is that they want the latest technology," he says. "So it's up to us to interpret this, and provide them with the best products, backed up with a level of service they expect."



The product is part of Virgin Media O2's strategic mission to further increase penetration of its services into people's homes. Not that it's doing too badly, with 33 million mobile connections. The company – which may sound familiar, but which



is also very new – is the result of the £31bn merger between Virgin Media and O2 last year, and as its CEO Lutz Schüler declared earlier this year, BT had "better watch out", as it seeks to make good on its pledge to bring connectivity services together in one place in its mission to upgrade the UK.

According to Turpin, chasing business needn't be seen as a dirty word, nor one that impacts service among an increasingly savvy customer base. "I don't see a contradiction between the customer services and commercial sides of the business at all," he says. "What people want are products and services that are relevant," he argues. "I see my job as finding out what's important to people, providing a proposition and a product, but also having this backed up with the best possible customer service."

Recent examples of this – on the back of focus groups and research amongst its customers – include not reintroducing roaming charges in Europe (EE, Vodafone and Three have all reintroduced extra daily rate charges); offering free screen replacements for mobiles, creating a flexible streaming service entertainment proposition that gives customers the freedom not to commit to packages for a full year and money off their streaming subscriptions; and its innovative 'Switch-Up' service. This latter offering allows customers to swap their current phone for a new mobile (as many times as they like), included at no extra cost on Plus Plans or for £3.99 a month on its Custom Plans. Meanwhile, Volt (launched last autumn), was the first joint customer value proposition from Virgin Media O2, which includes a Virgin Media broadband speed boost and doubled O2 mobile data for every eligible O2 Pay Monthly plan. The latter clearly shows customers the benefits of the merger, with enhanced value when they have services from both Virgin Media and O2.

"Through the merger, we very much hope that the more products customers take the happier they are, and the more



likely they are to stay," says Turpin. "What we're very mindful of though," he adds, "is that we can't assume the merger is as important to customers as we might think it is internally. So we have to get things right for them when customers do decide to take that leap of faith with us."

“We'll always look for insights on where we're getting things right – or wrong”

Customer services for both brands were brought under the same roof from day one of the merger. "Having everything in the same place ensures we have the same leadership team making decisions and observing trends," he says. "That's good for customers, in that it gives a single great platform for service," he adds. But more than this, Turpin also says it allows the business to better adapt to the often more complex nature of inbound customer queries now.

"There's a saying in the call centre environment that there are 'no nice calls left'," says Turpin. "Customers are incredibly knowledgeable now;

they can check the number of free minutes they have on our app, for instance, which means it's the tougher, more complex calls that tend to come in." He adds: "I'm reminded of another quote – one that says being a call centre agent is 'a bit like being a parent to a teenage child. Most of the time the kids aren't interested in you, but when they are, you'd better be there for them'." For this reason, he says he's incredibly proud to be hitting first-time call resolution rates of 75% and above for queries that do tend to be challenging.

The complexity of calls could worsen before they get better, as the oft-cited cost-of-living crisis bites, and agents start to hear from people who can't afford their bills or want to scale back. "This is something we are prepared for," says Turpin. "We already have a broadband social tariff that gives discounted access to essential connectivity for people receiving Universal Credit. We want to deliver great services for our customers whatever circumstances they're in." He adds: "It all comes back to relevance – meeting the needs and desires of people. We're very fortunate to be providing connectivity services that people now regard as essential. As people may hit more financially difficult times, we want to be an organisation people can trust. It's in difficult times that companies have to prove themselves."

Turpin acknowledges that many customer interactions are with highly digitally-literate individuals. "In the early days, we were advising people about how to operate their phones and which ones to choose. It's very different today," he says.

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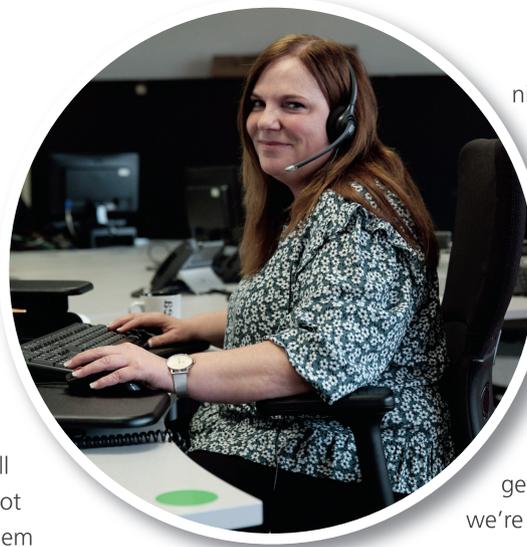


But since this creates more meaningful conversations with customers, he welcomes the evolution.

"Technically, we provide people's devices; it's their use of them for so many things in their lives that's expanded – for instance having their airport boarding pass on their phone. But we'll still take calls about people not understanding how to use them – even though it's not strictly our problem – because we always want to help," says Turpin.

Will a digital-first strategy for handling customer queries be the natural way to go? "I believe digital channels can provide great customer service," he says, "but we've got to strike a balance, and we're absolutely committed to continuing to talk to customers as long as that's what they want."

Turpin's passion for service is clear for anyone to see. He talks at length about service and relevance needing to go hand in hand. "Somebody – who loved mixing his metaphors – once said to me: 'Perception is



nine-tenths of the law'," he recalls laughing. "I've taken this to mean service is all about perception too. You can think you've designed the best proposition ever, but it needs to work for consumers – and that's the tough bit to get right. That's why we'll always look for insights on where we're getting things right and where we're getting things wrong."

Some of these will come from the 13 million interactions that occur each month via the My O2 app. "But just in the time we've been speaking, we'll have had more than 5,000 customer interactions," he says with pride. He adds: "I love the fact that our service never stops. We have people capable of interacting with customers 24/7. In everything we do, we want to make the customer have a better day. And – I can't say this enough – this has to be around providing relevancy. Whatever people are using our services for, we have to deliver on what people need." But best of all he says this: "those companies that deliver around the customer first rather than make the customer fit around them will be the ones that succeed." Steve Jobs couldn't have said it better himself.



## COMMS MATTERS

- Combined Virgin Media O2 has 33 million mobile connections
- The company has first-time call resolution rates of 75% and above for challenging queries
- The £31bn merger between Virgin Media and O2 took place last year
- The My O2 app attracts 13 million interactions each month

# DIGITAL FIRST

In eight years at consumer lender NewDay, Francesca Rea has built a highly digitised customer service function that is agile and responds to callers with empathy. She tells Liz Loxton how it was done



**F**rancesca Rea's career path in customer service shows the credentials of someone used to overseeing transformations, working in fast-moving sectors of business and often in fast-growth companies. Her current role, as the Director of Contact Centre and Service at consumer finance lender NewDay, demonstrates all three of those facets.



From introducing a customer relationship management system at AXA Life, helping to take O2 from the number five to the number one rated UK telecoms operator in customer satisfaction, to heading up the assure teams for customer experience at BT, Rea's experiences have been concentrated around optimising the customer journey via technology, while ensuring the human touch is not lost.

Rea joined consumer finance provider NewDay in 2014. At the time, the company, formerly SAV Credit, was just 50 people strong. These days, it has around 1,400 employees and over £3bn in annual gross receivables via a suite of white label plus own-branded credit cards, including Bip, the UK's first truly virtual credit offering with no plastic card.

The company's story is one of building in-house capability and experience to deliver both its own-branded credit cards, such as Aqua, as well as servicing credit card accounts for the likes of AO and Argos. The company is also about to re-launch the John Lewis Partnership card. Initially working with third party developers, NewDay decided to bring online and app development plus infrastructure in-house along with its own data lake development. In fact, building capability in-house turns out to be a strategy that has paid off time and time again, as the credit provider has sought to bring products and services to market at a pace that suited its own.

"NewDay is a company that's known for going very fast. We are very proud of it. We're not frightened to try new things and we move at pace, but we do it in a very compliant, risk-assured and responsible way," says Rea.

#### DIGITAL CO-ORDINATORS

Based on NewDay's platform and operating environment, the customer service team uses an

interface that Rea refers to as a 'single pane of glass', to access customer accounts along with a new in-house knowledge retention tool that features AI-driven education and training.

"We're now at the point where 99.2% of our customer service transactions are either self-service or automated. And therefore, the calls we get now in the centre are mainly around vulnerable customers, complex queries or digital coaching for customers," she says.

A key differentiator for NewDay is ensuring that the digital services – account management, transactions, and the majority of basic queries – are fully automated. To reach these ambitious goals around customer self-service, Rea has developed a team of customer service associates who are not only digital natives, but individuals who are highly skilled at coaching customers to get them back online – technologically adept and capable of passing on their online smarts to customers while handling them with sensitivity.

“ We will take all the time it needs to get them confident online ”

The digital co-ordinator role was first trialled last year and is now a full part of the company's recruitment strategy. "We've upskilled all our customer service associates to this digital co-ordinator level and we now only recruit at that level – people with great customer service and empathy. They also bring with them knowledge around connectivity, apps, devices and cybersecurity awareness," says Rea.

It is important, she emphasises, that customers receive one-to-one support whenever they need

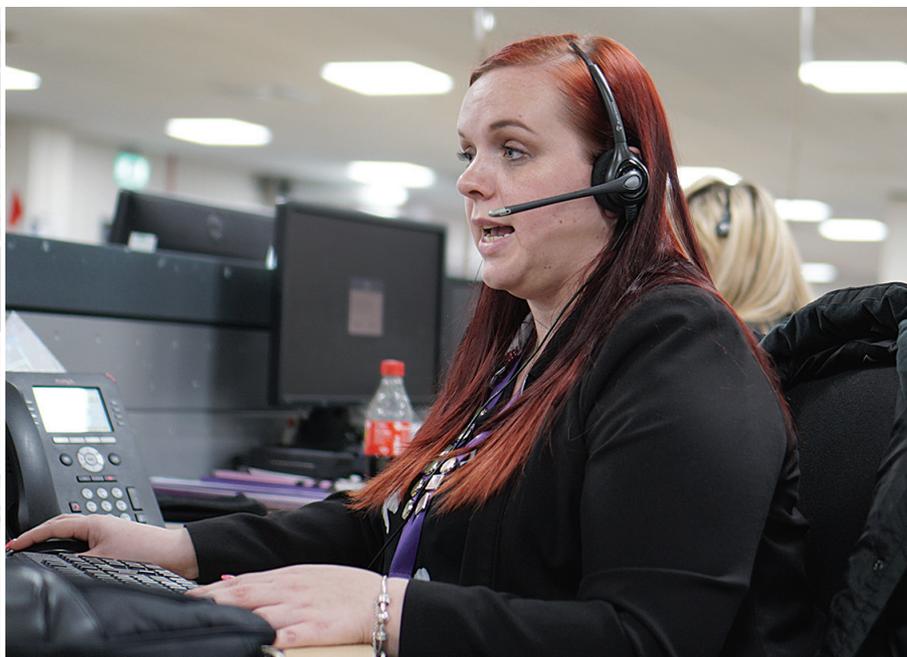
it to ensure they understand how to operate their account effectively online. “These digital co-ordinators – they’re able to help the customers, coach them to perform routines and tasks themselves online. We won’t process things for the customer and then tell them to go and do it themselves. We will talk them through it online, getting their confidence up and driving digital adoption further.”

Having invested heavily in making apps user-friendly and friction-free, ensuring that customers can make full use of its features – and experience that ease of use – is of utmost importance, she argues. “We will take all the time it needs to get them confident online, guiding them through it and helping reassure their fears,” she says.

Putting sympathetic digital natives on standby to guide customers through routine matters or technical glitches is all part of the service – and not a characteristic that even highly automated businesses should do without, she believes. Rea ascribes rising NPS scores – such as increases of over 12 points on NewDay’s direct-to-consumer offering taking them to over 73 – to this approach.

To keep their skills and knowledge up to date, digital co-ordinators can draw on NewServe – NewDay’s service operating interface – via their screens, or that ‘single pane of glass’. In fact, NewDay’s cohort of digital co-ordinators assisted with the design of NewServe. “It gives them all the information in the right way. It’s effective for them and means they can enrich conversations without scripting – we don’t do generic scripting here,” she says.

A new tool called ‘Clever Nelly’ from employee education specialists at Elephants Don’t Forget, uses AI to provide on-the-job training. Daily tests provide a continuous learning environment as well as training-needs analysis for managers. The resource responds to individuals, using built-in AI, by adding more questions in areas that need reinforcing. “We can see where they are strong individually, or as a group. I’m a real believer that the reason we get great scores is around our knowledge. You must recruit for capability, but then you must give them the knowledge. So often, you see companies either just not training people sufficiently and getting them out to answer calls too quickly, or changing things so frequently that their people can’t keep up. Having great knowledge means they can have a valuable conversation with someone with confidence. And I think that’s the biggest part of great service.”



IMAGES COURTESY NEWDAY

### NEW ADDITIONS

An upcoming addition to NewDay's credit card offering is the John Lewis Partnership Card, for which NewDay has brought on additional full-time employees in customer service. The card has a different demographic to others in the portfolio, and traditionally it is one that is growing in the digital environment. It's an example of embedding innovative technology while still providing meaningful customer-facing roles. "That's a great example where we will provide a seamless journey from acquiring cardholders, taking them through and registering them online, straightaway. And then we are also going to support that with the digital assistance where needed," she says.

A similar approach applies to the rest of NewDay's portfolio – Aqua (which includes 'Aqua Coach', a coaching service to help cardholders improve their credit scores); Fluid, which has a focus on balance transfer offers; Marbles, and Bip – the recently introduced cardless credit app which is accessible via Google Pay or Apple Pay, allowing users to set spending caps and other customisable features. With Bip, customers are registered and set up for online servicing in one seamless transaction, a feature that has helped take out some of the frustrations of the first few days of use. Often, the first 60 days after take-up result in many calls to a provider, as they get used to their new service and its features. "On Bip,

that call-in rate is right down at 4%, whereas with other clients it can be much higher – more like 20% in some cases in those early days" she says.

If NewDay has lessons in the contact centres for other brands, however, they are not just around technology. "It's about recruiting for the right capability and for empathy, training people effectively and then giving them the knowledge and tools at their fingertips so they're not having to search for information."



She has no time for companies that try to drive digital adoption by blocking telephone access for customers. "We don't do that and yet we have seen our calls reduce by 50% in the last two years. And that is because we are there when customers need us."

## CREDIT MATTERS

- 99.2% of customer service transactions are either self-service or automated
- Voice calls have reduced by 50% in the last two years in a highly automated environment
- The company has seen increases of over 12 points on its direct-to-consumer offering to over 73
- NewDay has 1,400 employees and over £3bn in annual gross receivables



# SHOPPING FLEXIBLY

At retail giant The Very Group, customer loyalty is an area that attracts close attention and investment, as CFO Ben Fletcher tells Liz Loxton

**From its origins in well-known catalogue brands and bricks and mortar shopping, the Very Group has evolved to take its place as one of the UK's foremost online retailers. Second only to Amazon among online-only retailers by UK sales, this multi-brand retailer has nearly a century of history behind it and a technologically-driven future ahead.**



The Very Group has been something of a quiet giant. Many people don't appreciate just how big the group is, Ben Fletcher, group CFO, suggests. With a turnover of £2.3bn, the group has built a loyal base of 4.8m active customers annually generating 652m visits to the retailer's websites. The group is also the UK's largest non-bank lender, with a debtor book just short of £1.6bn.

Littlewoods is one of its longest standing brands – one that many of us have grown up with, Fletcher contends. Meanwhile Very.co.uk accounts for 82% of the business and pulls in just short of £2bn in revenue.

The feat that The Very Group has pulled off lies in that heritage and the deep customer knowledge that brings. The retailer has tailored its online offering and service – a stand-out feature of which is flexible ways to pay – to the demographic it knows inside out. Fletcher describes Very customers as families on a budget who leverage the group's breadth of products, along with its financing, to shop for household basics as well as more aspirational products. "The example I use is a family going into a store. Buying the latest smartphone for hundreds of pounds, that's not an option. But they have the aspiration and the financial means to do that if it's broken out over a period of time. And that's what we offer," says Fletcher. "Working with brands to ensure they understand that actually we are an incremental opportunity for them is really important," he says.

As clear as that proposition sounds, the bringing together of 10 disparate catalogue brands in 2008 and growing that into a cohesive business with sales in excess of £1.9bn requires ongoing investment in technology as well as continuous vigilance around customer need and experience. Indeed, the customer experience needs to be

as frictionless as possible. Recent investment in the Very app has focused on improving product imagery and making Very Pay – the finance arm of the group – highly visible. Work on the underlying architecture of the website and app has been fundamental, says Fletcher.

Navigation, completing the checkout and managing a customer account all needs to be really easy and accessible.

The way Very achieves that is through 'relentless testing', he explains. "If I think back to my days in bricks and mortar businesses, testing something in a shop was actually quite hard work. In a digital business you can very quickly put things in front of customers," he says.

It all ties in with that deep understanding of customers. "More than anything, they tell us that they are time-poor. Every adult in the household is working, they're running around after their kids, probably looking out for broader family members as well. Their lives are full-on; they're covering a lot of bases. They have to make the most of the precious time that they've got. The easier we make it for them, the more they reward us."

“ Skygate allowed us to deal with the volume increases we saw in lockdown ”

#### FULFILMENT

The app and financing demonstrate the results of continual refinement and customer listening. Meanwhile, Very's logistics and delivery got kicked up a notch on the same day the UK's first lockdown was announced – 23 March 2020.

For the two years prior, Very had been working on Skygate, a highly automated fulfilment centre situated in the East Midlands within three hours of

80% of its customer base. On the morning of 23 March, Very's senior leadership team met – virtually – to confirm the decision that Skygate would 'go live'. The hub now manages 95% of customer orders, processing over half a million items a week and housing up to six million items. "That decision has been fundamental to the resilience of the company in the last two years. Skygate allowed us to deal with the volume increases we saw as a result of lockdown. From a customer point of view, it allowed us to extend our cut-off time from 7pm to 10pm for next-day delivery. The other thing it provides is speed. On Black Friday last year, from an order being placed to it being at the back door ready to go, the fastest we got that down to was 16 minutes."

**“The flexibility is what customers tell us they value the most”**

As times get tougher for consumers, customer service teams come to the foreground. For Very, automated responses to manage more straightforward and common queries are combined with teams of specialists, who deal with harder circumstances. "It's definitely right to say that you've got to blend the technology with the human response to deliver the right outcome," says Fletcher.

Some 137,000 customers a week use Very's chatbot, for instance. "A lot of people's queries are straightforward. 'Where is my order? When will it be delivered? What's the balance on my account?' All of that can be automated and that's what we've done. What we've seen is a double-

digit drop in the number of incoming calls to the contact centre."

That additional capacity allows Very's more specialist customer support teams to deal with more challenging situations, such as delays due to supply chain complexities, fraud or customers facing financial hardship. "Our whole philosophy is if someone experiences financial difficulty, how can we get you back on your feet?"

Fletcher describes Very Pay as the wrapper around the company's flexible ways to pay. Customers can choose their payment method transaction by transaction: they can pay in full on the day, opt to 'take three', meaning three equal payments over three months or, depending on the amount, opt for a 6, 9 or 12-month buy-now-pay-later period. Any amount not paid off in that time moves onto what's called a revolver account, which levies interest. Around 70% of transactions do not attract any interest, currently, which Fletcher puts down to the technology around risk assessment. Out of every 100 people who apply for an account, 70 will be turned down. Very also has the highest minimum payment level in the industry, he says.

"The flexibility is what customers tell us they value the most. The fact that they can break that out in



IMAGES COURTESY THE VERY GROUP; ONLINE SHOPPING ILLUSTRATION © RECYCLEMAN / SHUTTERSTOCK



a way that really works for them is important. And it is absolutely a driver of loyalty.”

The cost-of-living crisis will likely only sharpen attention on this risk assessment area of the business. “We are currently living through an economic period with features that really none of us have had to navigate. Thinking back to 2008-2010, there was higher unemployment, but not an inflation problem. Now we have a very hot labour market and a supply-led inflation problem.”

Fletcher says the business is already showing signs that customers are feeling the impact. Continuing to ensure the retail offer is affordable is a focus, as is reminding customers of the range of ways in which they can manage their account. Potentially, a cohort of consumers who don’t typically shop with Very will turn to the retailer as economic pressure builds. That close contact and habitual customer listening will be more in need than ever.

## ONLINE RETAIL MATTERS

- The Very Group has 4.8m active customers making 652m visits to its websites
- It is the UK’s largest non-bank lender with a debtor book just under £1.6bn
- Its back story includes 10 catalogue brands including Littlewoods
- The Skygate fulfilment hub is situated within three hours drive of 80% of its customer base

# 25<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY – 1997-2022

**This year, we celebrated our 25th anniversary. From our inception in 1997 to today, we have strived to help our members improve their business performance through better customer experience.**

Much has changed since 1997, with probably the greatest impact being the advancement in telecommunications and in particular the internet and the iPhone. This has driven a transformation in the customer service landscape.

The way we shopped and the pace we went about our daily lives was completely different, too. Online shopping was in its infancy – Amazon was a rapidly growing bookseller with 1m accounts globally – and in-store and in-person experiences formed the basis of interactions for most customers. British high streets were booming and acted as the focal point of many communities.



## Here's a selection of our Anniversary tweets...

**The Institute of Customer Service** @instituteofcs · Feb 19  
Thanks for helping us celebrate our 25th anniversary. We look forward to continuing championing the standards for our industry, making a positive impact on business performance and the wider economy.  
[hubs.ly/Q014szM\\_0](https://hubs.ly/Q014szM_0)

**The Institute of Customer Service** @instituteofcs · Feb 16  
#No.8 We launch the UKCSI - The national barometer of customer satisfaction published twice a year since 2008.  
[hubs.ly/Q014bN7Y0](https://hubs.ly/Q014bN7Y0)

**The Institute of Customer Service** @instituteofcs · Feb 19  
# No.25 Our blogs, resources and thought leadership help establish us as the go-to place for customer experience strategy and knowledge (since 1997)

**The Institute of Customer Service** @instituteofcs · Feb 17  
#No.11 Our Principles & Promises codify what we expect from our members and what they can expect from us (2017)  
[hubs.ly/Q014gRr20](https://hubs.ly/Q014gRr20)

**The Institute of Customer Service** @instituteofcs · Feb 16  
#No.9 We launch our Service with Respect Campaign 2020 to tackle mounting abuse affecting staff in customer facing roles across every sector.

**The Institute of Customer Service** @instituteofcs · Feb 18  
# No.16 We move our headquarters to London, with a network of field-based Client Relationship Directors to serve our members (2013)  
[hubs.ly/Q014gRnn0](https://hubs.ly/Q014gRnn0)

**The Institute of Customer Service** @instituteofcs · Feb 18  
# No.24 Our Trusted Advisory Network meetings enable members to share knowledge and network in small groups (since 2005)

Fast forward to today and some things remain fundamental. Authentic brands that deliver on their service promise and adapt to new customer behaviours with a blend of in-person and digital customer experiences will prosper. But there have also been significant shifts in consumer behaviour – the importance of sustainability, localism or human connection, for example.

We are proud of the journey we have been on with our members, but will never rest on our laurels. The challenges and opportunities ahead of the UK in the next 25 years look set to grow – geopolitical, societal polarisation, climate change and AI among them – and we will continue to champion the importance and impact of customer experience to the long-term survival of our members. We are encouraging all to be bold and stay focused on what can truly make a difference to their employees, customers, stakeholders and investors – inspiring the 'Service Nation'.

**The Institute of Customer Service** @instituteofcs · Feb 15  
This month The Institute celebrates its 25th Anniversary, we share our top 25 most memorable moments. @ No 4 First lockdown 2020, our Vice Presidents share expertise, providing members with downloadable top tips to maintaining great service

**The Institute of Customer Service** @instituteofcs · Feb 15  
This month The Institute celebrates its 25th Anniversary, we share our top 25 most memorable moments. @ No 2. The Academy Launch 2016 - since inception it has become an established centre of excellence for developing customer service professionalism.

**The Institute of Customer Service** @instituteofcs · May 16, 2018  
'Linking corporate governance to customer service is more important than ever' writes Institute CEO, Jo Causon, in special series of @FRCNews guest blogs marking the 25th anniversary of the UK Corporate Governance Code [bit.ly/2lqMR2g](https://bit.ly/2lqMR2g)

**The Institute of Customer Service** @instituteofcs · Feb 16  
#No.10 Our campaigning leads to the Government tabling an amendment to the Sentencing Bill and The Times publishes Service with Respect open letter (2021)  
[hubs.ly/Q014c0kn0](https://hubs.ly/Q014c0kn0)

**The Institute of Customer Service** @instituteofcs · Feb 15  
This month The Institute celebrates its 25th Anniversary, we share our top 25 most memorable moments. @ No. 3 We train the famously brilliant London Olympics workers in key customer skills (2011-2012)  
[hubs.ly/Q01490T50](https://hubs.ly/Q01490T50)  
#training #customerserviceskills

**The Institute of Customer Service** @instituteofcs · Feb 15  
This month The Institute celebrates 25th Anniversary, we share our top 25 most memorable moments. @ No. 5 setting the standards for service since 1997 by establishing and maintaining the very highest standards.  
[hubs.ly/Q01494sB0](https://hubs.ly/Q01494sB0)

# NATIONAL CUSTOMER SERVICE WEEK

## 3-7 October 2022

**N**ational Customer Service Week (NCSW) is fast approaching – from Monday 3 October 2022, we will all again be celebrating outstanding service up and down the country, with a series of themes.

It's a week-long opportunity to raise awareness of customer service and the vital role it plays in business and the UK economy.



As ever, we have prepared different activities for each day along with some NCSW ideas and resources, which you can access on our website. There is a free digital pack available and of course the usual promotional items to help you make the most of the week with your teams.

*The themes for each day are as follows:*

MONDAY 3RD OCTOBER



### The Human-Tech interface –

Drawing from our latest Breakthrough Research, we will present an overview of the technologies that have transformed the customer experience landscape and explore the right balance between human and technology.

TUESDAY 4TH OCTOBER



### Service with Respect Day –

Join us in supporting our vital campaign and celebrating a recent change in legislation to protect all customer-facing workers from hostility and abuse. If you haven't yet pledged your support, now is the time! Logos, social cards and other free resources are available on our website to show your support and continue the combat against abuse.

WEDNESDAY 5TH OCTOBER



### The Professionalisation of Service: Skills & Capabilities –

We will assess how customer service has evolved as a profession with defined skills, standards and a career development pathway, and identify key areas to develop and sharpen up your teams' skills.

THURSDAY 6TH OCTOBER



### Effective Strategy & Leadership –

We will discuss effective strategy and leadership skills. Great customer service starts at the top, and leaders should set their teams up for success by providing them with the environment, tools, and knowledge they need to provide excellent service.

FRIDAY 7TH OCTOBER



### Customer Service Recognition Day –

Given everything that has happened in the last year, it is more important than ever to recognise the individuals and teams that have gone above and beyond. Friday is all about celebrating those people who have succeeded through adversity and made a significant impact on your customers.

### Some benefits of getting involved in NCSW:

- Recognise the efforts and achievements of your customer service professionals;
- Raise prominence of customer service, and get it talked about right across the business – from boardroom to operations, to the front-line;
- Demonstrate your commitment to customer service internally and externally;
- Help embed a culture of excellent service in your organisation.

Visit [www.instituteofcustomerservice.com/ncsw](http://www.instituteofcustomerservice.com/ncsw) for more details.

# UK CUSTOMER SATISFACTION AWARDS 2023

**T**here has never been a more important time to recognise your organisation's successful Customer Service strategies and endeavours. The past years have been extraordinarily difficult for many businesses, but they have also been an opportunity to reflect and review.

Our UK Customer Satisfaction Awards celebrate and recognise the organisations, teams and individuals delivering an exceptional customer experience. The event culminates in a black-tie Awards dinner at the Hilton Park Lane on 7 March, 2023.

The awards remain free to enter and shortlisted organisations get a free place (*see our website for further details*).

## Why enter the UK Customer Satisfaction Awards?

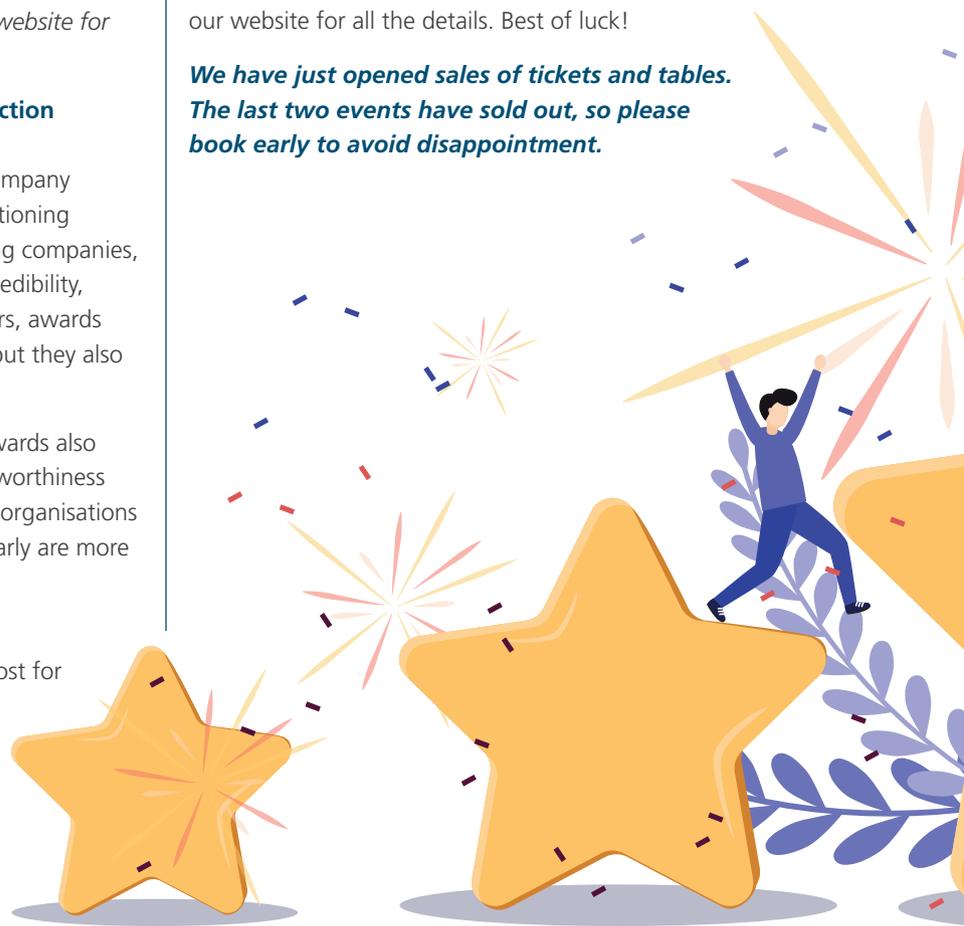
- Awards are a great way to boost company reputation and gain a stronger positioning against direct competitors: for young companies, winning awards can help cement credibility, whereas for more established players, awards not only showcase their expertise, but they also highlight innovation and relevance.
- Winning or being nominated for awards also serves as a strong indicator of trustworthiness among prospective customers, and organisations entering and winning awards regularly are more likely to see an increase in sales.
- Achieving recognition at an awards ceremony can serve as a morale boost for all employees: knowing they have contributed to the company's success is a great motivator to boost performance and can help attract new talent.

- Nominated organisations and finalists will receive highly valuable publicity before, during and after the event through print, email and social media.
- Entering and winning business awards demonstrates reliability and helps build brand loyalty, as customers are more likely to opt for businesses which are perceived to be doing well.

## How to enter the Awards?

Entries are open to both members and non-members until 14 October 2022: it is free to enter any of the awards categories, and shortlisted organisations will receive a free place at the awards dinner. Check out our website for all the details. Best of luck!

***We have just opened sales of tickets and tables. The last two events have sold out, so please book early to avoid disappointment.***



# AND THE CATEGORIES ARE...

- **ABa Quality Monitoring** – Customer Focus Award: Large enterprise
- **Cabot Financial** – Employee Engagement Strategy
- **Ipsos** – Best Use of Customer Insight
- **Kantar** – Best Customer Experience
- **Paragon Customer Communications** – Best Application of Technology
- **Pension Insurance Corporation** – Customer Satisfaction Innovation
- **TLF Research** – Best Customer Satisfaction Strategy Award
- Best Customer Service Partnership
- Customer Service Changemaker
- Customer Commitment Award B2B
- Customer Commitment Award B2C

- Customer Feedback Strategy
- Customer Focus Award: SME
- Customer Service Strategic Leadership
- Customer Service Professional of the Year
- Trusted Quality Provider
- Sustainable Customer Service
- Customer Service Return on Investment

**The Institute's Annual Conference**, which will also be taking place in March 2023, is a great opportunity to network and exchange ideas on the best approach to run a thriving business and attract and retain talent. We offer member and non-member early bird discounts, and have an exceptional line up of speakers confirmed, including:

- **Simon Roberts**, CEO, Sainsbury's
- **Dr Alice Maynard CBE**, Director, Future Inclusion
- **Jean-Marc Dupont**, Regional Director: Customer Service Europe, Amazon
- **Louise Beardmore**, CEO Designate, United Utilities
- **David Wood**, CEO, Wickes Group
- **Heather Bovill**, Deputy Director for Surveys and Economic Indicators, ONS
- **Oke Eleazu**, CEO, ManyPets

ILLUSTRATION © PIYAPHAT\_DETUN / SHUTTERSTOCK



PARAGON



## Tickets are now available for our next Annual Conference, taking place on **7th March 2023 at Hilton Park Lane, London**

Our Annual Conference brings together hundreds of business leaders and industry professionals from across all sectors. It is our flagship event, along with our UK Customer Satisfaction Awards evening, which follows it.



The theme for 2023 is Operating in the New Service Nation: Sustainability, Skills & Success. Join us to hear service stories and strategies from organisations including Sainsbury's, United Utilities and Amazon. Entries are also now open for our UK Customer Satisfaction Awards, including the new Customer Professional of the Year category.

## SECURE YOUR TICKETS NOW!

For more information visit: <https://www.instituteofcustomerservice.com/annual-conference/>

# BREAKTHROUGH RESEARCH – TECHNOLOGY AND THE FUTURE OF CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE

A Connected World  
Ensuring the right blend  
of people  
and technology for  
customer service

**D**igital transformation is causing a shift in strategy and business models as businesses respond to a new market environment. Multichannel communications are becoming a requirement for increasingly connected, informed and empowered consumers, and improving customer experience is at the heart of this digital transformation.

Our latest Breakthrough Research, which was published on 24 August 2022, gives an insight into the most important technologies and applications for customer experience, how to best achieve an optimal blend of human and technology-based experiences and what organisations should do to reduce the risk of digital exclusion.

Our report assesses the elements required to implement technologies successfully to achieve business performance and customer service objectives. In addition, it explores when the use of technology in a customer experience context becomes excessive – from an AI, data or personalisation perspective.

The launch webinar, which took place at the end of August, featured a presentation of the key findings from the research, followed by a panel discussion with the research sponsors from Amazon, Content Guru and Correla. The full report is available to download under the Research and Insight tab on our website, and members can access the webinar recording and slides in their Member Dashboard.

ALL IMAGES COURTESY THE INSTITUTE OF CUSTOMER SERVICES



## STAFF AND SKILLS SHORTAGES AND CUSTOMER SERVICE IN A DIGITALLY-FOCUSED WORLD



**by Oliver Hazell, senior account manager, Cavendish Advocacy**

The UK has been experiencing a shortage of skills and staff across the economy for a while now. These shortages are not just confined to one sector or skill level - it's at both ends of the skill requirement levels and across multiple sectors in the economy. However, coupled to this has been a distinct, growing and deepening trend of organisations across the country using digital methods of contacting, retaining and updating customers and their staff. Such a move makes sense in a world where COVID-19 still hasn't gone away. The impacts of the pandemic will be long-lasting as we can all now appreciate, particularly in the ways organisations communicated with their customers as call centres couldn't operate and digital solutions were found so staff could work from the safety of their homes.

However, the trend of increased digital approaches for customer engagement is one that could isolate and exclude some sections of the population who either can't, or don't want to use digital channels to communicate with organisations. Not everyone has secure, reliable and affordable access to the internet. Others don't trust digital communication – in an age where trust between a customer and an organisation is key to retention (see the most recent July UKCSI results for a snapshot as to why trust is so important).

I noted in my piece in the previous issue that the role of customer service workers was changing, and at pace, and this is still the case. But that change, particularly where it leans towards the digital aspect of communication for customers, should not be to the detriment of customers, particularly those two cohorts of people I mention above.

These combining and overlapping challenges of skills and staff shortages, a changing world and skillset requirements for service workers - at a time when organisations are moving evermore towards digital means of communication, to the potential exclusion of some - is something that the new Prime Minister must take hold of.

This new Government must ensure staff and skills shortages are driven down, and quickly.

It should place renewed focus on customer service work and its direct benefit to the growth of the UK economy as well. We've seen from the most recent UKCSI how business productivity is impacted by customer complaints. The data is there to evidence the correlation between staff and skills shortages causing inconsistent customer experiences and levels of services, leading to complaints, reducing productivity. The Government should also consider extending campaigns like 'Generation Logistics' – which seeks to encourage people into roles in the logistics sector – to the likes of the customer service industry too. Not only that, but the perennial challenges of the apprenticeship levy continue to require review and reform.

But whilst Government needs to play its role in ensuring staff and skills shortages reduce, and access to skills and talent improves, organisations also need to do their part as well. That comes in ensuring the right communications are being delivered to the right customers using the most appropriate channels for that customer. This is something that is being focused more on, particularly in the social housing sector as the Social Housing (Regulation) Bill moves through parliament, and indeed the FCA's new Consumer Duty noted the need to communicate in a clear and easy to understand way with customers in the financial services sector too.

If organisations can continue demonstrating to Government that they are communicating with customers in appropriate, easy to understand ways, using the channels preferred by each customer to ensure no-one is left behind or left without access to products or services, then Government must respond in kind. They should help plug staffing gaps through awareness and education campaigns on the vital role of customer service work to the economy and make it as easy as possible for organisations to recruit staff with the right skillsets. This success and growth of organisations will then, in turn, help to grow the economy as we continue to recover from the scarring impacts of geopolitical events and the pandemic.



# THE ACADEMY

by Sue Tonks, Director of Academy, Standards and Quality

**The ability to draw on highly developed emotional intelligence and empathy skills to really understand, support and guide customers through great experiences has never been more essential. With the ongoing increase in automation and digital delivery, this is transforming how our teams need to interact with customers.**

Relationship-based skills will always underpin how we deliver. However, the ability to help customers navigate online processes when they are not confident, brings a new dimension to customer support roles. Being able to build digital confidence and support self sufficiency for the future means understanding the customer at a deeper level and being able to deploy a coaching approach at times. Many weren't recruited on that basis so will need development support to achieve this transition.

Depending on roles and the range of what is offered, the skillsets will vary. That's why, as part of Institute membership, we offer access to a range of options to build short, medium and longer term service-based development pathways for a wide variety of roles.

Our content is underpinned by our research and developed through drawing on our expertise as the professional body for customer service. Our expert Academy team delivery and course standards and quality measures ensure learning can be embedded and maximises the tangible impact. There is always an articulated outcome for the individual, their organisation and their customers that deliver return on investment.

In such times as we face now, a short-term view may be to use a one size fits all approach and offer short training sessions to as many people as possible. However, taking a medium to longer term view and investing in quality training where smaller groups of learners can engage with topics, apply the learning to their own role and leave with tangible outcomes that can be implemented back in the workplace will pay dividends in the longer term.

Investing in existing employees to help them transition to new ways of working and be agile in response to ever changing customer needs is essential in the current environment. Recruitment is a challenge and retention is a key business priority for virtually every business. Organisations are thinking

long and hard about the approach they wish to take, but decisive action is needed – the customers are still there, with their evolving needs in terms of the support and solutions they are seeking. Satisfaction levels, trust and loyalty all take time to build and can be broken quickly if we don't keep pace with the expected level of service provision.

We know that people development needs to be flexible, and we have a wide range of options to suit all needs. We can help build a programme of development to support delivering your service strategy and objectives.

Our core delivery basis is virtual, flexible and cost effective for members to engage colleagues from different locations and teams where they wish to develop end-to-end understanding and customer experiences.

There is plenty to choose from including half- and one-day workshops, modular short programme courses, Professional and Management Qualifications, and – where integrated into a larger programme of delivery – some opportunity for bespoke development.

We work with organisations to build integrated programmes of delivery using Institute courses alongside your own training, technical or regulatory training, apprenticeships and other things.

There are combinations available to build the right learning pathways to suit your needs. For example, some members use a combination of half-day workshops, training courses and qualifications to provide a route of skills (and career) progression.

The Academy will be showcasing our ServiceImpact course during National Customer Service Week, so look out for the webinar. Come along and find out more about this course which is designed to develop emotional intelligence skill, understanding of different service delivery styles and to analyse customer types to form a deeper understanding of their needs.

Our Client Relationship and Academy teams would be happy to discuss your needs and provide options for inclusion in your employee development programmes. So whether you are about to develop something, or are looking for ready-made solutions, do talk to us.

**Please contact us at [enquiries@icsmail.co.uk](mailto:enquiries@icsmail.co.uk) for more information.**

## Dates for the diary

**16 SEPT 2022** Measuring What Matters

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**29 SEPT 2022** Handling Challenging  
Customer Interactions

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**03 OCT-  
07 OCT 2022** National Customer  
Service Week

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**05 OCT 2022** Head-to-Head with  
Shirley Fell  
(Cirencester Friendly Society)

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**12 OCT 2022** Head-to-Head with  
Richard Fearon  
(Leeds Building Society)

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**13 OCT 2022** Discovery Roadmap Meeting

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**01 DEC 2022** Trusted Advisory  
Network Meeting

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**07 MAR 2023** Annual Conference  
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